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Dee Lincoln

Ready for Her Closeup

Words: Carolyn Tillery Photos: Gittings Photography

If the name Dee Lincoln automatically makes you think of Del Frisco's and steak, prepare to sink your teeth into something vastly different. For the petite, raspy-voiced former cattle hustler, it's now all about, well, bubbles.

The co-founder of Del Frisco's Double Eagle Steak House has left the ranch for the vineyards with the opening of her second Dee Lincoln's Tasting Room & Bubble Bar in Dallas. The first opened at Cowboys Stadium in Arlington.

In 2009 she teamed up with her brother, Ricky Comardelle, the Dallas Cowboys, and Legends Hospitality Management to open a state-of-the-art, high-end wine, martini and champagne lounge at the stadium – the first high-end concept of its kind in a sports arena.

At first, Mike Rawlings, CEO of Legends Hospitality Management, had his doubts. "She's full of energy and big ideas," he said. "My first thought was that I didn't think it would be good and I was totally wrong. It worked great. She's very creative."

Stephen Jones, Dallas Cowboys chief operating officer and executive vice president, however could see her potential – and what an asset she would be to their stadium. "What our family aimed to do was to create more than just a stadium," he said. "We wanted it to be unique. If you look at Dee, she fits that to a tee. People talk about going to see her, as much as enjoying fine wine... It's about seeing her and the ambiance. Her personality carries the day.

"Everybody knows the brand... When Dee's involved, you're always second to none. I would personally bet on anything she's involved with. People equate Dee with quality and great atmosphere. Her strongest attribute is herself. She's a people person."

"Only a fool doesn't see past the charm," Jones said. "It's easy to come to like her very quickly, but don't underestimate her because she's a very savvy business person."

Dee knew the space at Cowboys Stadium would help her launch her plans. "Working with the Jones family and Mike Rawlings has been amazing," she said. "In opening the stadium wine bar, I knew it wouldn't be a big money maker, but it would establish my idea and open doors and offer something unique. We have 48 labels. I'm open for all games, concerts and events depending on suite usage.

"At the end of the day it was about establishing a brand. It was wine, martinis and champagne, service and hospitality wrapped around my name and reputation."

She has a storied history of creating successful restaurants with the Del Frisco name and reputation across the county. Along the

way, often referred to as the Queen of Steak, she not only oversaw the growth of the restaurant brand, she began to grow something else: the Dee Lincoln brand. And it's that brand she's now focused on nurturing. "I'm proud; I built an amazing brand," she said. "I just wasn't challenged or excited anymore."

In 1995, she and her former partner sold Del Frisco's for \$23 million to Lone Star Steakhouse & Saloon and its CEO, Jamie Coulter, who became a longtime friend and confidant. "Jamie is a friend and mentor," Dee said. "I helped him grow his management team, and it's why I'm where I'm at now."

After the sale of Del Frisco's, she remained with the company. When she decided to leave, she signed a one-year, non-compete agreement with the owners. That agreement, of course, couldn't put a governor on her thinking about exactly what she wanted to do. "I spent twenty-plus years with Del Frisco's," she said. "I felt my name was a brand in Texas and I had made a name for myself in other communities as well... I opened all eight Del Frisco's from build out to grand opening to months on-site."

Her partnership with Jamie Coulter was one which was mutually beneficial. "She's such a multi-faceted person, high energy," he said. "She's sucks the oxygen right out of a room the minute she enters. She's more fun than anyone I know. We've had a great time together and made a lot of money. Dee likes to make money."

Any successful new venture faces potential pitfalls. "Her biggest challenge will be fighting her desire to expand too fast and build too many – New York, Chicago, you name it," he said. "I'm here as friend and counsel, but she's out there by herself this time. Forty percent of her sales at Del Frisco's was wine. She knows about elegance, manners and style. It will be great. I don't think she can miss."

Dee and husband of 17 years, John DiNardo, of whom she calls "my real business partner," met as one might have expected with Dee: in a restaurant. "He entertained a lot, so I saw him all the time," she said. "It took me a long time to agree to go to lunch with him. He was like, 'Look, I don't like steak this much!'" she said with her loud, happy signature laugh.

Dee knows she is taking a chance by trying something new and different in a community that loves its steak and Mexican food. "There will be something for everyone," she said. "I have one shot. They (customers) move with you quickly and leave just as quickly. The last thing I'd want is, 'OK, yes, it's Dee Lincoln but I can't afford it.' I want people to stop by on their way home from work, hang out with friends or celebrate a special occasion."

Changing her focus from steaks to grapes won't prove a problem for her, according to Mike Rawlings. "Think about what she's known for," he said. "It's great style, environment, fun; the steak is just food. I think it all transferred to the new place."

It was Dee's sincerity and lack of pretence, which made her one of Diane Johnston's close friends. "If you needed something in the middle of a tornado or the middle of the night, she would find you

and help you," Diane said. "She's just a little force of nature... She can sit and have a beer with you one day and hang out at the Oscar's the next; she treats everyone the same. Regardless of how you know her: as the crazy Cajun, the natural business woman, through her kindness to individuals and charities, when you think of her, you smile. I've never heard someone say, 'Dee's not one of my favorite people.'"

Her new wine bar – the first stand alone – is located in the Uptown area of Dallas across from the Hotel Crescent Court. "Rosewood was the same kind of partner I had at the stadium, committed to luxury," Dee said. "Here, I wanted no expense spared."

The look and feel of her new space is taken directly from champagne itself: light, bright, cool and sophisticated.

However, there's a deliberate effort to underscore casual elegance. The décor features creamy white sofas and deep chocolate touches. Layered, sheer, patterned drapery softens the immediate visual stimuli of magenta zebra carpeting, mirrored tile and all those bubbles (as in chandeliers and crystal light globes) and wall art. The focal point is without a doubt the sweeping curved floating stairway encased in seamless glass.

"That gave them fits, I assure you," Dee said laughing. "The glass people were like, 'You want what!'"

The first level offers low seating, softly-lit rounders, leaning post and a bar, where wines and champagnes will be available by the ounce, glass or bottle. A stainless steel sculpture by artists, Jennifer Gilbert Asher and Mario Lopez, will be the center focus of a patio for 60 that provides another casual gathering area and can accommodate smokers.

The space affords a large area upstairs for entertaining and a couple of semi-private dining areas as well. There is a library, or museum of sorts, a cozy enclave where sippers can gather and gander at a career of awards, commendations and signature art by Peter O'Neil.

"A lot of people end up having to go to hotels for entertaining space," Dee said. "This is where chef, culinary and hospitality experience comes in. I can provide it all."

In addition to a 2,500-bottle wine cellar, there is one other special second-story amenity: privacy. For the celebrity or star athlete who wants a private drink or meal out with friends sans all the prying eyes, cell phone paparazzi have been dealt a blow. A discrete rear stairway to the parking garage is the answer, allowing some guests to come and go unobserved.

To establish her VIP base, Dee has designed 100 VIP black cards with a \$1,000 limit. "There's a new black card in town! I want to have a real base; to really know who my VIPs are."

There is no shortage of restaurants in Dallas – and there are even more that don't succeed. "Most people don't have the passion or patience to see it through," Dee explained. "It's a tough business. Instant gratification isn't there... There are investors and business

partners – a lot of people don't know the difference. I've been careful and I've been blessed. I am where I can make a decision because I want to not because I have to."

She knows what it takes to succeed and it starts with finding the right staff. "I hire those who understand my expectations and core values," she said. "Much of this group is younger; you have to keep moving. It's hard to break habits, good or bad, but I have to have what I want and need."

Joining her new team are chef Juliard Ishizuka, who was at The Mansion for four years, and general manager Lyndsey Gray, who has worked with Dee for eight. "It's great to surround yourself with both experience and those who want to be mentored and to grow."

She is already scouting locations for a second free-standing wine bar, this time in Fort Worth. "Now that I've seen my options here, I know what I can do there depending on the space and location," she said. "I'm now really seeing it evolving."

Dee worked with consulting chef Blaine Staniford on a menu that will include classic caviar, salmon stack, a variety of beef and seafood sticks, crispy port salute with huckleberry jam, hot crab dip, flatbread creations and "not your ordinary meatballs." "I've eaten meatballs all over this city!" she said laughing. "There will also be nice rolls. The food will have substance, and there will be daily features. Our dip trio of house-made pimento cheese, hummus and roasted eggplant with marinated olives will be hard to match. The whole menu will be fluid; we have a nice portfolio."

"There's a steak war going on in this city. There's Del Frisco's, Morton's, Bailey's, Biernat's, The Palm, Ocean Prime, it's just keeps going. So, I knew I wanted my food to be non-traditional. We'll have probably 12 to 18 items to start."

The entire second floor will have a menu designed to meet all catering needs and desires.

Jack Gosnell, partner in UCR Urban, a boutique specialty retail leasing firm, who





found the current property and is scouting locations for the Fort Worth site, said Dee trusts her instincts. "She knows instantly whether it's a possibility or not," he said. "She's thoughtful and thorough, but when she sees the one that's right, she instinctively knows. I had a feeling Rosewood and Dee would connect. I wasn't sure the exact spot would work. They set such a high bar of hospitality – and Dee is such an amazing definer of that.

"She has amazing focus. When she sets her mind to something, she's going to get it come hook or crook... I think anyone who has ever spent any time with her would want to continue that relationship. I can't imagine her ever burning a bridge. She's just so gracious."

Yes, she was looking for a new challenge, but opening the new ventures had more to do with her family than her own needs or a desire to feed the masses. "I have eight years to go until my daughter is out of school," she said. "I wanted to do it for me and for my family. If my daughter grows up and wants to enter the business, then I have this legacy for her."

Although she had no experience with casual dining other than as a consumer, opening The Dinghy Bar & Grill was a mix of going home and going forward. "I grew up on the water," she said. "For six years I had a boat at Lake Lewisville. I liked to water ski, go tubing. When I was approached to buy The Dinghy, I went out and looked around and said forget it. They persisted and six months later and a complete renovation, I've grown to love it.

"I've had a lot of fun with it. We opened Memorial Day weekend 2010 and at the opening there were so many people that the dock was sinking! I was like, 'Oh my God!' I have the fuel dock as well, so it's turned into a really good business deal."

Dining out for Dee Lincoln always ends up an education. "I love food and wine," she said simply. "More importantly, I love dining. I'm with people I care about, and I'm critical of service. I always take away what folks were doing right rather than wrong. I notice presentation; people always eat with their eyes first."

Being immersed in a food environment all day, hitting the kitchen at home might be the last thing one might want to do – but not Dee. "I love cooking, and I cook a lot," she said. "Sundays are always at home if we can help it and one weeknight as well. We also grill a lot – with all the trimmings.

"I always fix Christmas and Thanksgiving dinners. I love to cook wild game – rabbit and dove. While at Del Frisco's I never missed cooking Christmas dinner for my staff."

Growing up in a large Louisiana family much evolved around meals. "I'm one of five; I have four brothers," she said. "I grew up in a home where there were always pots on the stove. I make a really, really, really good crabmeat corn soup. Every time I take it somewhere I put the recipe in my purse because someone's going to ask for it."



It's hard to see how such a connoisseur of good food can keep from gaining weight. Dee Lincoln knows the secret. "Everything in moderation!" she said. "I never order the sauce on the side or anything like that – and I do eat steak. I'm pretty disciplined, though. I love to work out, but I'm not a freak about it. I do cardio four times a week and work out with light weights. That's my own private time. My brain works well at that time."

When she has any spare time, it's all about family. "I love hanging out with our daughter Bella," she said. "I try to carpool, get home, have snacks, go ride bikes. I have that couple of hours between school and dinner and we do pretty much whatever she wants to do.

"John and I try to have a date night each week – even if it's just grilling out together in our backyard while Bella's doing homework. We have a beautiful backyard and enjoy being out there."

Up next for the oft-described "fire cracker" – born on the Fourth of July – is perhaps a book. "Oh, about life in the restaurant business," she said, again laughing. "I want it to be educational, but I'm going to tell all the stories, the charity work, basically going from steaks to grapes."

Who and where she'll be in 10 years is already mapped out. "I'll always be Dee Lincoln – always," she said. "I promised my husband that we would downsize our Dallas home and have a small second home somewhere. However, Dallas will always be home."

Her main goal however is quite simply to grow. "I want to really, really, really learn more about wine and to get the education and credentials that measure up. I'm getting further pulled and challenged. I've a lot to learn, but I'm comfortable and motivated.

"Champagne and sparklings have been a whole new world opening up to me. There's so much to learn about bubbles!"